

NASA News

National Aeronautics and
Space Administration

Washington, D C 20546
AC 202 755-8370

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For Release
IMMEDIATE

RELEASE NO: 78-19

NOTE TO EDITORS: In view of many recent inquiries in
covering Skylab, you might be interested in the attached
fact sheet.

DATA ON THE ORBIT OF THE SKYLAB WORKSHOP

The latest data on the orbit of the Skylab Workshop
indicates that it will have descended to 150 nautical miles
(173 statute miles, 278 kilometers) altitude and could
begin reentry into the Earth's atmosphere as early as
late summer of 1979 and as late as the second quarter
of 1980.

NASA bases its prediction on data provided by the
North American Air Defense Command's (NORAD) satellite
tracking organization, the Smithsonian Astrophysical
Observatory, and the Swiss Federal Observatory.



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Mailed:
February 6, 1978

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and Space Administration) 3 f

NASA is working on plans that may extend the Skylab reentry time, such as reactivation of the Skylab Workshop's thruster attitude control system (TACS) to cause it to go into a very slow tumble which would decrease the atmospheric drag and perhaps add several months to the orbital lifetime. NASA will attempt this in spring of 1978.

In addition, the launch of a Teleoperator Retrieval System (TRS) on an early Space Shuttle mission, about October 1979 is being examined. The TRS would be carried into orbit by the Shuttle, removed from the Shuttle payload bay and flown by remote control to dock with Skylab. Once docked, a propulsion system on TRS could be operated either to raise the Skylab orbit or to cause it to reenter the atmosphere in a controlled fashion to a remote ocean area of the Earth below. (TRS is part of NASA's Fiscal 1979 Budget proposal now before the Congress.)

Skylab is the largest payload in Earth orbit. It weighs 85 tons and is about 96 feet long. The main portion is cylindrical, 22 feet in diameter.

Skylab on descending into the Earth's atmosphere is expected to break up and burn during descent. Some debris is expected to survive the reentry and reach the Earth's surface. It is probable that any surviving debris would land in an ocean since 80 per cent of the Earth beneath the Skylab orbit is water. In orbit, Skylab is passing above the area of Earth between 50 degrees north and 50 degrees south latitude.

Skylab was launched in May 1973 and was manned during three missions by three different astronaut crews. The last crew departed Skylab Feb. 8, 1974 at an altitude of 237 nautical miles (273 sm, 440 km). Skylab presently is 220 nautical miles (253 sm, 408 km) above Earth.

At the time the final crew departed NASA estimated that the orbiting workshop would remain in space until 1983. However, since that time the orbit has decreased at a higher-than-anticipated rate and NASA has been adjusting its predictions from time to time. Contributing to the more rapid rate-of-descent is an increase in atmospheric drag which in turn is caused by sunspot activity.